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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the political issues of the 1980 presidential campaigns as expressed by televised political spot advertisements during the primaries. Issue information was coded for 140 30- and 60-second political commercials. An advertisement's issue score was defined as the number of terms used that matched terms from a predetermined list of current topics of national interest. The total number of issues mentioned was 649, 20% of which belonged to the national well-being category. Next highest was the economy, followed by the energy and foreign policy/foreign relations categories. Republican spots focused over a quarter of their issue references on government management and federalism, while both parties gave roughly comparable attention to the economy, energy, national security, and national well-being issues. The major issues covered in incumbent Jimmy Carter's ads were national security and foreign policy, while for Edward Kennedy they were foreign policy, economic, and energy issues, and for Ronald Reagan, federalism and national security. Among the other candidates' spots, George Bush's commercials mainly dealt with the economy, government management, and national security, while those of John Anderson focused on domestic and economic issues, energy, foreign policy, and government management. (HTH)

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DEFINING THE ISSUES OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION FROM TELEVISED POLITICAL SPOT ADVERTISEMENTS

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DEFINING THE ISSUES OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION FROM TELEVISED POLITICAL SPOT ADVERTISEMENTS

At first blush, the idea of accurately identifying the issues of a presidential campaign by examining the content of its televised political advertisements seems as invalid as judging someone's moral character by the cologne or make-up s/he wears; it appears trivial, frivolous, and mistaken on the face or it. But upon reflection, such a proposition is justified.

First, from the perspective of the continuing proliferation in the use of such commercials by candidates, political commercials should nowadays receive greater consideration as sources for issue expression than they have received in the past. Ample evidence suggests that expenditures for political spots have increased steadily since they came into extensive use in the 1952 presidential campaigns.[1] In the 1980 presidential campaigns their use continued to increase,[2] thus qualifying political spots as worthy of continued investigation in terms of their value in communicating issues to voters.

Second, research in political communication indicates that more issue content is available from political advertisements than from network news coverage of political campaigns.[3] Joslyn's content analysis of political commercials found that issues were present in about three quarters of all advertisements analysed.[4] In addition, Devlin's impressionistic account of political commercials from the 1976 campaign and others offers interesting further support that such messages are in part concerned with issue expression.[5] Such findings warrant continuing research into the issue content of political spots.

Hence, more than ever, televised political spot advertisements seem justified as sources of issue content in political campaigns. Therefore, the

political issues of the 1980 presidential campaigns were assessed via a quantitative content analysis of the televised spot advertisements created for nine candidates from the 1980 primary races.

Research Questions

The questions of interest from the foregoing rationale were as follows:

1. What were the political issues of the 1980 presidential campaigns as expressed by the televised political spot advertisements for the 1980 primaries?
2. What were the political issues of candidates and parties in the 1980 presidential campaigns as expressed by televised political commercials for the 1980 primaries?

In succeeding analyses, the data in this study were treated not as a sample but as a census.

Methods

Investigating the issues of the 1980 presidential primaries from their political advertisements required a justifiable definition of commercial issue content. Data were collected in two stages; first, videotapes of 30 and 60 second political commercials for the 1980 primaries were acquired. Then, issue information was coded for all spots.

The candidates whose spots were included for analysis are listed in Table I by party and by last office held:

Insert Table 1 Here

The political commercials for the 1980 primaries were selected for study because they offered a rich source of issue expression; with material from nine campaign organizations, and an all-time-high number of primary races operating in the political system, the 1980 election year presented a unique research opportunity.

The Issue Concept in Political Research

It has been generally agreed in political research that issue information refers to "specific policy" stands,[6] and to topics tied to the civic concerns of the citizenry.[7] From the literature, what has counted as issue content have been those references "linked to the national interest."[8] Hence, issues were defined as "current topics and civic concerns linked to the national interest."[9]

Operational Definition of Issue

An issue score was defined for each commercial as: the total number of positive evaluations made by coders of terms found in each advertisement which matched terms featured in a list (supplied by the analyst) of current topics linked to the national interest. This method of coding issue scores for each commercial was a partial reduction of semantical content analysis to what has been called sign vehicle analysis,[10] and uses a set of sign vehicles as a representative of a semantic class (in this case, campaign issues).

A positive evaluation occurred when coders determined that a sign vehicle from a commercial referred to a "current topic linked to the national interest" rather than to some entity that was not a current topic. (Example: If a coder watched a commercial wherein the word "depression" was used, and if the word also appeared in the sign vehicle list, then it was considered for inclusion in

that commercial's issue score; if however, the reference of the term was judged by a coder to be a historical reference about the era of the great depression rather than to a current economic concern, the term was not included in that commercial's issue score.)

Development of the Operational Definition of the Issue Construct

Delphi Panel

An expert panel of four political scientists and a communication scholar familiar with political propaganda discourse generated a list of issue terms contained in a subsample of advertisements analyzed in this study. This Delphi Panel[11] watched a 25 percent subsample of commercials (35 spots) and wrote key words and phrases used in the advertisements which referred to current topics linked to the national interest. In addition, the panel was asked to keep track of the frequencies with which issue terms were used.

After viewing, panel members discussed all terms used and their frequency of usage; this additional information allowed a rationale to form for using frequently used terms as category divisions under which to subsume all others representing issues.

Follow-up to Delphi Panel's Efforts -- A follow-up effort was made to expand the list made by the Delphi panel; the researcher selected terms from the remaining 75 percent of advertisements which were semantically similar to those selected by the panel but which were absent from the subsample viewed by the panel. This was done to certify that issue terms contained in the final sign vehicle list would represent issues contained in all 140 advertisements.

Classification Scheme of Issue Categories

The category divisions for all issue sign vehicles consisted of the following nine headings:[12]

1. Carter's Record as President.
2. Domestic Issues.
3. Economy.
4. Energy.
5. Federalism.
6. Foreign policy/Foreign relations.
7. Government Management.
8. National Security/Military Strength.
9. National Well-Being.

Plan for Coding Issue Terms

The final sign vehicle list and category divisions were submitted to coders (graduate students enrolled in advanced political communication courses) who viewed each advertisement. In each case where a term on the list matched a term in a commercial, an evaluation was made to determine whether the term actually referred to a "current topic linked to the national interest." Each time that a positive evaluation was made, a score of one point was assigned to the category selected for the sign under examination. In this way, semantic issue material for each commercial was scored. Finally, a summative composite issue score was computed for each commercial.

The Reliability of Coder Judgments

Category reliability for issue scores was computed for a 10% subsample of commercials.[13] The coefficient of reliability was .8262. This value was deemed acceptable and coding for all 140 commercials was completed.

Results & Discussion

Table 2 reveals the proportions of issue mentions comparing Democratic and Republican parties, and the population for all issue categories. As coded, the total number of issue mentions for all 140 commercials was 649, nearly 20% of which belonged to the national well being category. Next highest was the economy, with nearly 13 percent of all mentions, followed by the energy and foreign policy/foreign relations categories, each with nearly 12 percent. Domestic and national security/military defense issues contained 10.2 percent and 10 percent of all mentions, respectively. The government management category received 11.4 percent of all mentions, and was the only other category to receive over 10 percent. Inspection of the first column of table 2 enables comparisons to be made among issue categories for all commercials analyzed.

Table 2 also enables comparisons with respect to parties. No spots made for Republicans contained references to Carter's record as president; all such mentions originated from the Democratic camp, and comprised only 5.8 percent of democratic issue mentions. This proportion score was among the lowest coded, and was equal in magnitude to that scored for the federalism category in spots made for Democrats. Similarly, the government management category, for Democrats, contained only 7.2 percent of all mentions. By contrast, Democrats' spots had over a fifth of all mentions coded into the national well-being category, nearly matching the Republicans' proportion score for national well-being.

One explanation for the different treatment by parties of Carter's Record as president is that, during the primaries, Democratic candidates Kennedy and Carter (the incumbent) were locked in bitter fighting; Kennedy focused negative criticism on Carter hoping to rally enough support to unseat Carter; hence, it was mainly Kennedy who communicated the view that the nation (and the Democrats) could not survive another Carter term.

Republican spots on the other hand focused over a quarter of their issue references on government management and federalism while both parties gave roughly comparable attention to economic, energy, national security and national well-being issues, with national well-being issues most prevalent.

Perhaps one reason for the universal emphasis on national well-being is that it is not divisive; all citizens presumably view the continuance and growth or the nation as positive. Therefore, candidates presumably run a lower risk of precipitating defections by mentioning aspirations of the American Dream than by defending more controversial and substantive issue positions.

In spots made on behalf of Republicans, after national well-being, the greatest concerns were for the economy (with 12.3 percent of all mentions), federalism (12 percent), foreign policy (9.9 percent), and government management (14.4 percent of issue mentions). For Democrats, however, the major issue concerns were for the economy, (13.8 percent of all mentions), energy (12.7 percent), and foreign policy (14.5).

Table 3 compares the proportions of issue mentions of candidates and population across all issues. On domestic issues, the only candidates' spots to exceed the population proportion were those of Anderson, Kennedy, and Reagan, with Anderson's score substantially higher than that of the population for domestic issues. The main reasons for this outcome were Anderson's

constant concerns for gun control legislation, passage of the EPA extension, and women's rights in general, among others.

By contrast, spots made on behalf of candidates Brown and Connally were least concerned with domestic issues, and had proportion scores for this category of only 2.4 percent and 1.8 percent of issue mentions, respectively. It is interesting that for candidate Connally, nearly 80 percent of all issue mentions were accounted for by the three categories of national well-being (35.2 percent), federalism (25.9 percent) and energy (18.5 percent). For Connally's commercials, these were the only categories with scores substantially higher than the population; moreover, no other candidates' advertisements contained as high a concentration of issue mentions in as few categories as did the Connally advertisements, although Carter's spots run a very close second.

The federalism category seemed to break clearly along partisan lines, with Democratic candidates' spots generally containing low proportions of issue mentions and Republican candidates' spots generally containing substantially higher proportion scores than the population. The federalism scores for candidates Reagan, Crane, and Connally's spots were especially reflective of these partisan concerns. No other issue category had scores which differed so vastly from the population for so many candidates from the same party. In addition, except for Brown, no Democratic candidate had a federalism score higher than the population; (Brown's federalism score was virtually equal to that scored for the population). For the remaining Democratic candidates (Carter and Kennedy), federalism issues were less salient than they were for other candidates. Hence, federalism can be viewed as a Republican issue.

On foreign policy both Baker and Brown's spots had substantially higher proportion scores than the poulation (26.6 percent for Baker's spots and 17.1

percent of issue mentions for Brown's spots, vs. 11.9 percent of issue mentions for all commercials). Among the reasons for the exceptionally high foreign policy scores in Baker's advertisements were his references to the hostage crisis in Iran: his concern for making policy that would assure that we "never have another Iran in our lifetime," and that we provide adequate protection for our embassies.

On issues of government management, except for Brown's advertisements, there is a tendency toward partisan concern similar to that discovered for the federalism category, but it is not as sharply defined as in the case of federalism issues. For government management, all republican party advertisements except Connally's exceed the population proportion, with Crane's commercials doing so by the largest margin (29.2 percent of all mentions vs. only 11.4 percent for the population). This can be attributed to Crane commericals' mentions of waste in spending within government, specifically described as fraud, corruption, and mismanagement. Overall it can be said that Crane's commercials drew a highly critical and negative picture of the government machine.

As for national security and military defense, the only candidates' spots to exceed by a substantial margin that proportion scored for the population were those of Bush, Carter, and Reagan, with 16.0 percent, 26.8 percent, and 15.4 percent of all issue mentions, respectively, vs. 10.0 percent for the population. The inordinately high score for Carter's advertisements (over a quarter of all issue mentions went for national security issues) can be explained by Carter's repeated pledge that his "number one responsibility is to defend this country, to maintain its security . . . " and ". . . to put a strong defense at the top of my priority list. . . ." Clearly as the incumbent under siege from the crisis in Iran and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, it

was necessary to reflect to the electorate a well placed pre-eminent concern with national defense. In this case, his spots, clearly reflected the geopolitical reality that gripped Carter's White House throughout the primary period.

In summary, after national well-being the major issue concerns of commercials made on behalf of incumbent Carter were those of national security and foreign policy. For Kennedy commercials, major concerns were foreign policy, economic, and energy issues. For Reagan's spots, federalism and national security issues were predominant. Candidate Bush's commercials mainly dealt with economic, government management, and national security, while Baker's spots concerned foreign policy and government management. Anderson's spots dealt with domestic, economic, energy and government management issues while Brown's advertisements dealt mainly with energy, foreign policy, and government management. Connally's spot emphasized energy and federalism. Finally, Crane's spots emphasized government management, federalism and foreign policy.

The results of this study indicate that political commercials do express issue content; hence they hold some value for the political system. This analysis revealed a plethora of issues concerning mainly national well-being, the economy, foreign policy matters, energy issues, and government management concerns. These findings are consonant with the political climate during the 1980 election year and underscore a concern with issues featured in the news media as prime concerns of the political system at that time. To the extent that the results obtained in this study reflect accurately the political climate of the 1980 campaigns, the procedures used to score commercials for issue content were adequate. These findings enhance the credibiilty of political spot advertisements as a source of issue content to the extent that

they were reflective of the political events considered salient during the campaign period. Hence, one may conclude that televised political spot advertisements are not merely frivolous diversions. Such commercials can accurately define the issues of a political campaign. During the 1980 presidential campaign, the nation was at odds with soaring inflation and unemployment rates, as well as oil, mid-East, and foreign policy crises (i. e., high OPEC prices, the Iranian hostage situation and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan). Hence, the concerns expressed as salient issues in this study are the same concerns which were salient during 1980.

Of the issues contained in 1980's primary spots, Democrats were most concerned with matters of the economy, energy, foreign policy and national security, while Republicans were most concerned with federalism and government management. The policies of the Reagan administration underscore these Republican concerns and add further credibility to the findings presented here.

Limitations and Further Research

This analysis of televised political advertisements has inherent limitations as well as theoretical significance. First, this study addressed only semantic (verbal) issue phenomena and did so from a frequency measure rather than from a conceivably equally valid time based measure. To the extent that issue phenomena are located in the temporal domain, this study did not explicate them.

In addition, some issue references were difficult to code, and, depending on interpretations of the text, could have been reasonably coded into more than one category. This was apparent in the case of a few issue terms which might have been coded equally well into the federalism or government management categories.

Finally, there is an obvious limitation of generalizability to all televised political commercials. Since data were from the 1980 primaries only, generalizing results to past and future campaigns in tenuous. However, the methods developed here can be used to assess political issue content in other campaigns. Clearly, there will always be the need to refine issue categories depending on the context of particular future campaigns. Succeeding efforts should try to refine the classification scheme used in the present effort.

Television is commonly considered basic to contemporary American politics. These results underscore further the validity of that widely held assumption. Televised political commercials can be a serious vehicle for disseminating issues. In the past such commercials have come under severe criticism by some observers who have condemned them as frivolous and issuesless diversions. The findings presented her caution against summarily discounting all political spots in this way.

Political thinkers old and new have consistently theorized that a necessary constitutent of politics and political action is talk, public deliberation, and debate concerning matters of importance to the state. Today, the political spot has emerged as one vehicle for just such expression; hence, these messages sit squarely on western political tradition.

One concludes that it is a great mistake to discount all politial commercials as issueless and therefore wasteful. On the contrary, these data suggest that political commercials attend to contemporary issues and reflect the political concerns of the times, regardless of how entertaining and emotionally engaging such messages might also be.

ENDNOTES

[1]Minow, N. N.; Burch, D.; Corcoran, T. G.; Heard, A.; and Price, R. Voter's Time: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Commission on Campaign Costs in the Elctronic Era. New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1969, pp. 7-9, 15, 16. Federal Communications Commission. Survey of Political Broadcasting Primary and General Election Campaigns of 1968. August, 1969. Alexander, H. E. Financing the 1972 Election. Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1976, pp. 318, 333, 335.

[2]Broadcasting, January 14, 1980, p. 27. Chicago Tribune, "Television Advertising Plays Big Role in Most Campaigns." January 20, 1980, 1:6. New York Times. "Risks and Rewards Propel Candidates Toward Tuesday." Sunday, February 24, 1980, 4:2. New York Times. "Reality Can Make or Break a Candidate (Or His Image)." Sunday, April 6, 1980, 4:4E.

[3]Patterson, Thomas E., and McClure, Robert D. The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976.

[4]Joslyn, Richard A. "The Content of Political Spot Ads," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 57, 1980, pp. 92-98.

[5]Devlin, Patrick L., "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1976," Central States Speech Journal, Vol. 28, 1977, pp. 238-249; see also, Devlin, Patrick L. "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1972," Journal of Broadcasting, Vol. 18, 1974, pp. 17-26.

6Kaid, L. L., and Sanders, R. R. "Political Television and Commercials: An Experimental Study of Type and Length." Communication Research, Vol. 5, 1978, #1, p. 57.

7Patterson, T. E.; McClure, R. D. "Television News and Political Advertising." Communication Research, January 1, 1974, pp. 3-31.

8Hofstetter, C. R., and Judge, M. J. "Content Analysis of Typed Television Stories: Coding Manual." Ohio State University, Polimetrics Laboratory Working, Paper # 2, 1974.

[9]Hofstetter, C. R., and Judge, M. J. "Content Analysis of Typed Television Stories: Coding Manual." Ohio State University, Polimetrics Laboratory Working, Paper # 2, 1974.

[10]Lasswell, H. D.; and Leites, N. eds. The Language of Politics: Studies in Quantitative Semantics. New York: George W. Stewart, 1949.

[11]Cegala, D. J., and Bassett, R. E. "The Goals of Speech Communication Instruction: The Teacher's Perspective," In Allen, R. R.; Brown, K.; eds. Developing Communication Competence in Children. Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook, 1976.

[12]"Carter's Record" specifically concerned references to the blunders, failures and errors of the incumbent. "Domestic" issues specifically concerned national and social welfare problems, eg., education, crime, civil rights, industry and non-governmental institutions. "Economy" focused on economic growth and recession on the standard of living, the status of business and finance, costs, prices, the work force, earning and buying potential, etc. "Energy" incuded alternative methods of generating power, running machines, heating homes, supporting the nation's future power needs, and the impact of such needs on the world's ecology. "Federalism" included smooth running of government, and the application of bureaucracy to mediate the progress of the nation. "Foreign policy/Foreign relations" included international relationships, agreements, expectations, resolutions, occurrences, and negotiations between nations, foreign trade, foreign trouble spots, and institutions negotiating foreign affairs. "Government Management" focused on financial government programs, policies of taxation, and budgetary and financial policies of government. "National Security/Military Strength" focused on safety of the nation from military aggression of potential international enemies, the maintenance of a safe margin of weapons protection against threats to the physical survival of the nation's people, and references to peace and avoidance of war. "National Well-Being" focused on the vision of the American Dream, the hope of all Americans for the continued growth of the nation, subsequent status of the nation, in the long run, and values and commitment of citizens to strive for continued success of America.

[13]Scott, W. A. "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding." Public Opinion Quarterly, 19, 1955, p. 321-325.

Table 1

DISTRIBUTION AND FREQUENCY OF ADVERTISEMENTS BY CANDIDATE, PARTY

Candidate	Last Office Held	Sec. Ads	# 30 Sec. Spots	# 60 Spots
John B. Anderson *(R)	Rep., 16th Dist., Illinois	24	21	3
Howard H. Baker (R)	Senator, Tennessee	14	12	2
Edmund G. Brown, Jr. (D)	Governor, California	7	3	4
George Bush (R)	C. I. A. Director	22	21	1
Jimmy Carter (D)	President, U. S.	18	13	5
John B. Connally (R)	Secretary, Treasury	15	11	4
Phil Crane (R)	12th Dist., Illinois	9	9	0
Edward M. Kennedy (D)	Senator, Massachusetts	26	19	7
Ronald Reagan (R)	Governor, California	5	5	0
Party				
Republican		89	79	10
Democrat		51	35	16
Total		140	114	26

* (R) = Republican (D) = Democrat

Table 2

PROPORTIONS OF ISSUE MENTIONS COMPARING DEMOCRATIC, REPUBLICAN PARTIES AND POPULATION (PERCENTAGES)

	Population *N = 649 **M = 83	Democratic N = 276 M = 33.5	Republican N = 373 M = 49.5
Carter's Record	2.5	5.8	0
Domestic	10.2	8.0	11.8
Economy	12.9	13.8	12.3
Energy	11.9	12.7	11.2
Federalism	9.4	5.8	12.0
Foreign Policy	11.9	14.5	9.9
Government Management	11.4	7.2	14.4
National Security	10.0	11.2	9.1
National Well Being	19.8	21.0	19.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

*N = Total Number of Issue Mentions
**M = Total Commercial Time in Minutes

Table 3

PROPORTIONS OF ISSUE MENTIONS COMPARING CANDIDATES AND POPULATION (PERCENTAGES)

	Pop. N=649 **M=83	Anderson N=100 M=13.5	Baker N=64 M=8	Brown N=82 M=5.5	Bush N=81 M=11.5	Carter N=71 M=11.5	Connally N=54 M=95	Crane N=48 M=4.5	Kennedy N=123 M=16.5	Reagan N=26 M=2.5
Carter's Record	2.5	0	0	0	0	4.2	0	0	10.6	0
Domestic	10.2	27.0	4.7	2.4	7.4	7.0	1.8	8.3	12.2	11.5
Economy	12.9	13.0	9.4	9.7	21.0	4.2	3.7	10.4	22.0	11.5
Energy	11.9	14.0	7.8	14.6	8.6	5.6	18.5	10.4	15.4	3.8
Federalism	9.4	3.0	9.4	9.7	8.6	2.8	25.9	16.7	4.9	26.9
Foreign Poicy	11.9	6.0	26.6	17.1	3.7	9.8	3.7	14.6	15.4	7.7
Government Management	11.4	13.0	15.6	17.1	12.3	0	7.4	29.2	4.9	11.5
National Security	10.0	7.0	9.4	11.0	16.0	26.8	3.7	4.2	2.4	15.4
National Well being	19.8	17.0	17.2	18.3	22.2	39.4	35.2	6.2	12.2	11.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*N = Total Number of Issue Mentions.
**M = Total Commercial Time in Minutes.